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ABSTRACT

A program at Ohio State University that allows graduate students to develop self-designed interdisciplinary degree programs is described (the "One-of-a-Kind" program). An evaluation of the program was undertaken by surveying: 6 current students and 15 graduates of the program since its inception in 1972; faculty members who served as program advisers; and faculty members who were not involved in the program. Generally, the results showed that students and faculty participants were supportive of the program. In open-ended survey questions, respondents discussed both administrative and academic problems: students focused more on the administrative problems, while faculty concentrated more on academic problems. Based on the evaluation, it was recommended that the program be retained. While only a small number of students use the program, it was generally viewed as a good option for some students. Additional recommendations to improve the program are offered, and a review of the literature on interdisciplinary and self-designed programs is included. (SW)

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To Preserve or Eliminate Student-Designed Interdisciplinary Graduate Degree Programs: Evaluating a Specific Program

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Ann K. Dickey, Chair
Forum Publications Editorial
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To Preserve or Eliminate Student-Designed
Interdisciplinary Graduate Degree Programs:
Evaluating a Specific Program

Abstract

A specific graduate degree program at a major university combines aspects of student-designed and interdisciplinary degree programs, and it is discussed relative to both liberal and general educational values. Because of a move to terminate the program, it was studied in order to evaluate whether it warranted continuation. Current students and alumni of the program and faculty members were surveyed. Most of the respondents were supportive of the program, but several problems were identified. The final recommendation was for continuance, and several suggestions for improvement were made and have been implemented.

Introduction

There has been much debate regarding preferences of liberal, traditional, general, and specialized approaches to education. These debates are ever present with different sides gaining and losing support as times change. Today, there is strong support on many college campuses to replace the liberal educational plans, such as student-designed programs, which arose out of the late 1960s and early 1970s, by more traditional educational values (Barol, 1983). At the same time, there are proponents, who would like to see more liberal educational programs, such as interdisciplinary studies (Newell, 1983).

It is not the purpose of this paper to discuss educational values in general, but to analyze the merits of a specific program which has some liberal and general educational values. The program, which is called the "One-Of-A-Kind" program, is housed at Ohio State University, and it allows graduate students to develop unique interdisciplinary degree programs. While this type of program may not be considered special at some universities, there is little doubt that it is viewed as a liberal program in an institution whose academic degree programs are housed in single discipline departments. The program allows students whose proposals are accepted by the Graduate School's Curriculum Committee to transfer out of single discipline departments into the Graduate School to pursue their self-designed, interdisciplinary programs. Students select faculty members to advise in the design of the programs, which utilize existing university courses but draw from various traditional disciplines.

Recently, the question of whether to abolish the program surfaced, because some faculty and administrators believed that the program required too much of their time. In an effort to properly evaluate the program, the

Graduate School's Curriculum Committee surveyed the opinions of both students and faculty. The data show that many students and faculty indicate that the flexibility of permitting such unique educational opportunities outweigh the administrative costs of running the program; however, the data also show that many faculty oppose the program. This paper presents the arguments on both sides of the issue, in addition to presenting an analysis of the data and recommendations for the program.

Background

Interdisciplinary Study

Lynd (1982) provided some history behind the interdisciplinary movement and attributed much of the initial impact to James Bryant Conant, president of Harvard University, who worked for curriculum reform shortly after World War II. Lynd discussed the rise of recent programs that have crossed disciplinary boundaries to gather faculty members to teach courses and design new degree programs. Three such programs, which have gained recognition on various campuses, are black studies, urban studies, and women's studies.

Lynd also attributed the student unrest of the 1960's as a revitalizing factor for interdisciplinary studies, which have grown considerably in the last twenty years. "The newly formed Association for Integrative Studies has members from over 100 colleges and universities, and a 1977 directory (Bayerl, 1977) of interdisciplinary studies in the humanities lists over 2300 programs in senior institutions" (Newell and Green, 1980). Newell and Green also stated that there are over 5000 faculty who teach interdisciplinary courses in environmental studies alone.

Several other individuals have given encouraging reports for the

concept of interdisciplinary studies. Riley (1979) noted the importance of utilizing knowledge sources from various disciplines for problem solving ventures. There are some problems which simply cannot be investigated by using a single discipline approach. Marx (1981) called for both students and universities to break the habits of over specialization and narrow thinking. He predicted that "all areas of industry, academe, and the arts will be faced with complex issues that depend for their solutions on interdisciplinary approaches." Newell (1983) called for a reorganization of liberal higher education, establishing departments of interdisciplinary studies that would teach all freshman-level introductory courses and most upper level topical courses. In his plan, single discipline departments would continue to offer courses in concepts, theories, facts, and skills.

Newell and Green (1982) indicated that while there appears to be much support for interdisciplinary work, "it is an unusual institution of higher education where many of the faculty do not view the interdisciplinary program on their campus with skepticism, if not hostility." These opposing faculty are typically concerned that there is little substance in the courses and programs, and what substance there is simply duplicates already existing courses and programs in single disciplinary departments.

Student-Designed Programs

While some interdisciplinary programs are structured and have permanance within a university, others, like Ohio State's One-Of-A-Kind program are not. Such unstructured programs require special design, usually inititated by a student who obtains assistance from faculty members. Of course, student-designed programming is another topic, like interdisciplinary studies, which draws considerable opposition, as well as support.

"Student-designed programming arose at the end of the late sixties as a response to a conviction held by some students that the conventional departmental majors constricted their personal aims in seeking higher education" (Smith and Clark, 1980). Smith and Clark looked at the remnants of these programs which are scattered throughout traditional colleges and universities, as well as making up entire institutions, such as the University Without Walls and Empire State College. The authors attempted to analyze the pros and cons of such programs and assembled a rationale for their continuation.

Smith and Clark drew heavily from the work of Arthur Chickering (1969, 1980), who is a proponent of liberal education in general and student-designed programming in particular. Smith and Clark indicated that there is one particular statement by Chickering that provides a foundation for the survival of student-designed programming:

> If persons, not products, are to be primary, if the people, not the interplay of disparate, conflicting, and uncoordinated systems and pressures are to control the future, then higher education must devote itself to men, not subjects. (Chickering, 1969)

Chickering also noted that sound educational programming must follow "knowledge of where a student is, where he wants to go, and what equipment be brings for the trip." Chickering was concerned that "when significant differences are ignored, some students will be missed entirely and many barely touched."

Paul Dressel (1980), another proponent of student-designed programming, recognized that a problem of traditional educators is that they fail to make allowances for the unique student who desires to pursue his own interests rather than a traditional program. Dressel noted that

opportunities should exist for these students. He stated,

> Individuals who guide their own learning based upon their own interests and apart from the structures and rigidities of the traditional classroom are quite likely to have achieved insights, tastes, and abilities that differ from and even transcend those of students exposed to traditional education. (Dressel, 1980)

Murphey and Pringle (1979) and Pringle and Murphey (1980) discussed a very flexible, nontraditional program which is not only student-designed but allows students to enroll at a variety of institutions and gain credit by a variety of means, including prior non-academic experience. In their studies, these authors analyzed the programs of more than 1500 students who completed undergraduate degrees through the Illinois' Statewide Non-traditional Program, and they determined that the program was a benefit to students and the academic units which were involved.

One should note that the primary focus of all of the above literature is on undergraduate, not graduate education. There has been very little written about student-designed graduate education; however, many of the same arguments for such undergraduate programs are just as plausible at the graduate level. While addressing doctoral study in the field of education, Wolf's (1980) analysis of the change in doctoral degree programs that have surfaced since the 1950's implied that the time is probably ripe for flexible programs. He noted that compared to the 1950's, the doctoral student today faces "fewer program requirements, much less program structure, and considerable diversity among faculty with regard to program expectations both within and across institutions."

Writing about doctoral education, Passmore and Swanson (1980) stated,

> People often enter a doctoral program with vaguely defined reasons for pursuing an advanced degree. . .The

> process leading to the degree is considered rarely by students as a means for matching and developing their unique characteristics with social, educational, and economic problems addressed by our profession. Many institutions detract further from this link between students and their ultimate social roles by specifying rigid credit hour and course requirements for the degree . . . in stating uniform degree requirements, institutions neglect the varying degrees of competence and experience entering students possess as well as the many possible fields of knowledge and structured experiences that could contribute to students' education.

Passmore and Swanson recommended a solution to these problems in what they called the Personal Career Development Plan (PCDP), which was designed improve the way doctoral students and graduate faculty agree on the programs of study to be pursued. The PCDP allows students to identify areas of prior experience and future concern. It also allows faculty to assess students' skills. Then faculty and students can individually design programs of study to meet the students' needs. Needs can be met by non-traditional methods as well as traditional coursework.

The PCDP allows flexibility and individually tailored programs, while providing enough control to ensure a quality program of study for graduate education. In essence, it is a "one-of-a-kind" program for every student who enters the department. While the PCDP is applied only to industrial teacher education, the idea has potential value for any area of study.

While it is clear that many scholars support the flexibility of student-designed and interdisciplinary programs, Barol (1983) presented recent evidence of a move away from flexibility toward curricular conservatism. He discussed the continuing historical struggle to balance rigor and flexibility in curricula, and noted that the last big swing toward flexibility was during the early 1970s when many schools loosened requirements in response to student demands for relevance or freedom.

Several scholars were interviewed in Barol's article, and they indicated that now the swing is reversing, and there is a restoration of rigor. Provost J. R. Morris of the University of Oklahoma stated, "the nation can't afford the educational waste that has been going on" (Barol, 1983). Harvard's associate dean for undergraduate education Sidney Verba said that Harvard has recently revised its core curricula. This type of move has been made by many institutions in order to ensure that "every student will touch all academic bases in four years" (Barol, 1983).

The article also states that students prefer the changes being implemented. Provost Maurice Glicksman at Brown University said that nine out of ten students opt for standardized programs instead of designing their own. It is important to note while this behavior may be a current trend, the article indicates that most faculty believe that flexible options should be retained.

Methodology

Four groups of respondents were sent questionnaires regarding the One-Of-A-Kind program at Ohio State. The data collection process extended over a year, with different groups surveyed at different times, as a result of different requests from the Graduate School's Curriculum Committee, which was asked to evaluate the program.

The initial survey was mailed in May 1982, to the 38 alumni who had graduated from the One-Of-A-Kind program since its inception in 1972. Nine of the 38 questionnaires were undeliverable due to incorrect addresses. Of the 29 surveys that were delivered, 16 were completed and returned, giving a response rate of 55.2%. By the time these data were collected (middle of June, 1982), the Committee had adjourned until the beginning of the new

academic year. When the Committee was reconstituted, a subcommittee was appointed to analyze these data, evaluate the One-Of-A-Kind program, and make recommendations to the full committee.

The subcomittee decided that more data were needed in order to properly evaluate the program. The second group to be surveyed was current students who were enrolled in the program. Ten students were enrolled in the program during Autumn 1982 and were mailed surveys. Six of the ten responded for a 60% response rate.

The third group of respondents was faculty members who had served as either advisers or committee members on individual One-Of-A-Kind programs of current students or graduates of the program. Fifty-three faculty members were identified as still being at Ohio State, and they were sent two different questionnaires. The first questionnaire consisted of a series of brief, closed-ended questions, but more detail was sought by the committee, so a follow-up open-ended questionnaire was also sent. Twenty-five of the fifty-three faculty members responded to the open-ended survey for a response rate of 47.2%. Thirty-nine individuals responded to the closed-ended survey for a response rate of 73.6%.

With these data, the subcommittee reported to the Curriculum Committee in January, 1983. The full committee decided that information was needed from faculty members who had not been involved in the One-Of-A-Kind program, but were aware of the program. It was decided that departmental graduate studies committee chairpersons would fill this role, and thus those 120 individuals comprise the fourth group that was surveyed. Closed-ended questionnaires, which were basically identical to those used for the other faculty group, were mailed in early March, 1983, and fifty-five members of this group responded, giving a 45.8% response rate.

Results

Current Students and Alumni

Graduates of the program were asked, "Are you satisfied with the education/experience you received in your One-Of-A- Kind degree program?" Of the 16 graduates who responded, eight indicated "very satisfied," six indicated "satisfied," one said "dissatisfied," and one was undecided. The breakdown for current students, who were asked the same question (except for verb tense), was three very satisfied and three satisfied. It should be noted that 16 out of the 22 respondents provided unsolicited comments on their appreciation of the program. It is clear from these data that most of the respondents strongly support the program, although it cannot be ruled out that some of the non-respondents might be so dissatisfied that they chose not to repond to the survey.

Even though the overall support is strong, certain problems were identified, and three of these appeared to be major concerns. First, six alumni and one student felt there was little interaction among their committee members. This is perceived as a serious problem given the interdisciplinary nature of the program. Interaction among the faculty members from different disciplines is a necessity for the program to work.

The second problem involved job placement. Ten alumni indicated that they had no assistance in locating jobs upon graduation. Neither the faculty members on the student's committee nor the adviser seemed to take an interest in helping a One-Of-A-Kind student find a job. This figure is somewhat higher than the results of a study by Freeman and Loadman (1985) who found that 56% and 37% of the doctoral graduates at two institutions were dissatisfied with their committees' assistance in finding jobs for them.

The third problem area involved the administration of the program, and it seemed to be of most concern to the respondents. Nine out of the 16 alumni and four out of the six current students gave negative comments regarding the administration of the program. The comments can be collapsed into three categories: 1) the approval process is too long, 2) there is too much bureaucracy involved in changing a course in the program, and 3) the Graduate School actively discourages students from participating in the program.

Faculty

The faculty respondents were asked to agree or disagree with several statements, and Table 1 provides results of some of the items. The first statement is "In general, I have a favorable impression of the One-Of-A-Kind program at OSU." Of the 55 faculty members who had prior service on One-Of-A-Kind programs, 80% agreed with this statement, 12.7% disagreed, and 7.3% had no opinion. Of the 39 faculty members who had no prior service on One-Of-A-Kind programs, only 38.5% agreed with the statement, while 17.9% disagreed, and 43.6% had no opinion.

At first glance, these data appear to support the notion that faculty members without prior service are less likely to have a favorable impression of the program; however, it is important to note that the same percentage of both groups disagreed with the statement, while there is a much greater percentage of those without prior service who had no opinion. It is likely that because this latter group of respondents is uninformed about the One-Of-A-Kind program, these respondents had no opinions. If they were to become informed, they might agree with the statement as much as the other group.

Respondents were also asked to agree or disagree with the statement,

Table 1

Faculty Opinions Regarding the One-Of-A-Kind Program

	Faculty with prior service on One-Of-A-Kind Student Committees				Faculty with no prior service One-Of-A-Kind Student Commitees			
Issue	Agree	Disagree	No Opinion	(N)	Agree	Disagree	No Opinion	(N)
Favorable impression of program	80.0%	12.7	7.3	(55)	38.5%	17.9	43.6	(39)
Program should continue	90.7%	5.6	3.7	(54)	78.9%	13.2	7.9	(38)
Student programs lack in-depth planning	63.6%	20.0	16.4	(55)	28.2%	12.8	59.0	(39)
Student programs are fragmented	30.9%	50.9	18.2	(55)	30.8%	10.3	59.0	(39)
Faculty are less watchful of One-Of-A-Kind students	50.0%	29.6	20.4	(54)	42.1%	26.3	31.6	(38)

"The One-Of-A-Kind program at OSU is an option that should continue to be available to students with well-defined interdisciplinary interests and research problems." Of the 54 faculty members with prior service, who responded to the question, 90.7% agreed with the statement, while 78.9% of the 38 faculty without prior service agreed with the statement. Clearly, a substantial majority of each group supports rentention of the program.

While 84% of the total faculty sample responding to the question support the preservation of the One-Of-A-Kind program, they do recognize the existence of problems. Respondents were asked to agree or disagree with three statements which deal with potential problems of the One-Of-A-Kind program. The first statement is "One-Of-A-Kind programs occasionally lack sufficient in-depth planning." Of faculty with prior service on One-Of-A-Kind programs, 63.6% agreed with, 20% disagreed with, and 16.4% had no opinion on the statement. The results for faculty without prior service show 28.2% agreeing, 12.8% disagreeing, and 59% having no opinion.

The second statement is "One-Of-A-Kind programs tend to be more fragmented than interdisciplinary." The results for faculty with prior service are 30.9%, 50.9%, and 18.2% agreeing, disagreeing, and having no opinion, respectively. For faculty with no prior service, the results, given in the same order, are 30.8%, 10.3%, and 59.0%. The third statement is, "A potential problem with One-Of-A-Kind programs is that faculty committee members may tend to be less watchful of the academic program and of the student's progress." The results for faculty with prior service are 50% agree, 29.6% disagree, and 20.4% no opinion. The results for faculty without prior service are 42.1%, 26.3%, and 31.6%.

The data show that faculty with prior service on One-Of-A-Kind programs

are more supportive of retaining the program; however, they are also more aware of the problems of the program. The data indicate that two important problem areas are planning and guidance (watchfulness) of the individual programs and the students. It is possible that the faculty would like to see some tightening of the guidelines to help avoid these problems.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Generally, the data indicated that students and faculty who participated in the One-Of-A-Kind program were quite supportive of the program, with the students being a little more supportive. The respondents also recognized that problems exist with the program. In the open-ended questions, respondents discussed both administrative and academic problems, with the students focusing more on the administrative problems, and the faculty focusing more on the academic problems.

Based on an analysis of these data, several recommendations were made. The first recommendation was that the program be retained. While only a small number of students utilize the program, it was generally viewed as a good option for those few students who cannot be served by any other means. Initially, the Curriculum Committee was concerned that the program demanded too much faculty time for so few students; however, the faculty respondents did not generally mention this as a problem. Indeed, many proclaimed that the option was needed for those few students.

Since it was recommended that the program be retained, the rest of the recommendations were directed toward improving the program. Regarding the length of time it takes for proposals to be reviewed and changes to approved programs to be accepted, the following two recommendations were made in an effort to improve these processes. Regarding the first problem,

a more systematic process was needed, so it was recommended that proposals be reviewed twice per year on specified dates. This would allow students to have advance knowledge of deadlines, thus, they would know when to expect a decision. It would also provide deadlines for the Curriculum Committee, as well.

Regarding the second problem, it was recommended that more responsibility be given to the student's selected advisory committee. It was suggested that the individuals on a student's committee should be able to monitor the student's program once it has been approved by the Curriculum Committee, which means that they should be able to act upon requests to make course changes. It was believed that this policy would result in more expedient curricular changes, as well as more interaction between the student and the student's committee, since most students need changes to their proposed curriculum at some point in time.

In delegating this power to the student's advisory committee, the Curriculum Committee would be giving up some quality control, but this recommended procedure would not be unlike the procedure used for advising graduate students in individual departments, where a student's committee dictates the actual course selection. Because of the unique qualities of the One-Of-A-Kind program, it was argued that more guidance was needed, so it was recommended that three of the four members of a student's advisory committee have the necessary qualifications to advise graduate students in their home departments. It was believed that this policy would provide some assurance that qualified faculty are guiding One-Of-A-Kind programs. An added benefit of this policy would be the elimination of the old cumbersome process which was used to change a course in a program, and this would mean that less time would be required of the Curriculum Committee

members and the Graduate School staff. It was also hoped that easing some of the old rigidity would reduce what some students perceived as active discouragement of students from participating in the program.

Regarding the problems of isolation and job placement which the students noted, it was recommended that the Curriculum Committee make an effort to insist that members of a student's advisory committee take a more active role in counseling students in these areas. Granted this would not be an easy task, but individual faculty members could make attempts to integrate One-Of-A-Kind students into the faculty members' departmental activities, even if the students are not technically in these departments. Advisory committee members could also make special efforts to help these students locate employment, since these faculty are most familiar with the unique programs of these students.

Implementation of all of these recommendations has been achieved, and the policies, at least on the surface, seem to have improved the One-Of-A-Kind program both administratively and academically; however, a future follow-up study will be necessary to verify these assumptions. At least the restructuring may prevent future discussion of the elimination of a program which is viewed by many as an important option for a selected group of individuals who feel the need to transcend the traditional graduate educational programs of single discipline departments. A successful program could also serve as a guide for other institutions with similar departmental curricular constraints.

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